

FINANCIAL OPTIONS FOR UNDERGROUNDING UTILITIES

In the last newsletter we reviewed the benefits of undergrounding our wires. Few residents disagree with the benefits, but many worry about the cost. Here's an overview of some of the cost issues and options.

Financing an undergrounding project in our town is a big challenge. We have 64 miles of overhead lines throughout the town, and it will cost roughly \$50M to bury them all, right up to each house. This figure is based on the latest estimates by R. W. Beck & Associates, an engineering firm with extensive experience in undergrounding and municipal utility projects. We believe it is a reasonable planning estimate, but it is not a fixed bid.



A sizeable cost, certainly, but an important aspect of this estimate is that it assumes the project is done for the entire town in a staged but integrated package, not as series of independent projects undertaken by individual neighborhoods. The integrated approach would take 3-5 years, and offers significant economies of scale reflected in the \$50M figure; the piecemeal approach - a typical route taken by other cities - will be far more costly per parcel.

If we were to spread the total cost equally across the town's 3000 parcels, each owner would be billed about \$17,000. While many residents are willing & able to pay this much for the benefits of undergrounding, many others could not, even with low-interest financing. The 2000 census indicates that a significant percentage of our residents are retired and on a fixed budget. Our goals for undergrounding are to beautify and upgrade our town, not to bankrupt neighbors. So even if a majority supported this "equal payments" method, it does not make sense for our town.

Another approach is to use a municipal funding instrument called a Benefits Assessment District. Tiburon, Manhattan Beach and Hermosa Beach are using it for their undergrounding projects, but in our case it would shift much of the financial burden of the project to those in the town who could least afford it. So again, this is not a good option for us.

It seems the best option to underground our town is to use a General Assessment. While this approach will require 2/3rds voter support, homeowners would pay an amount proportional to their own property taxes. With a General Assessment, homeowners would likely see a 10% increase in their current annual property tax bill for a period of 20-25 years.

Sound reasonable? We think so. You'll hear more about it in the coming months; until then please let us know if you have questions or comments.

— LAH Underground Utility Committee

SUPPORTERS OF WESTWIND BARN RECEIVE GRANTS

The first year of the new non-profit organization, "Supporters of Westwind Community Barn" has been highly successful. SWCB President, **Elaine Nelson** states, "This first year has been a whirlwind! Starting in September 2003, SWCB has been raising awareness and funds for the restoration of the barn and the creation of a community room within its footprint. The community room will be used for arts and environmental classes, as well as for the handicapped-riding program."



Photo by Jitze Couperus

Jean Mordo, treasurer of SWCB states, "We are grateful to our generous donors including individuals, businesses, and foundations, including grants of \$5,000 each from the **Los Altos Community Fund, the Skoll Foundation, and the Packard Foundation.**"

SWCB is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization, and is separate both from the Town and the "Friends of Westwind," who operate the Barn.

The SWCB hosted several events during the past six months. They were beneficiaries of the "Westwind to Wineries" event sponsored by Hills 2000-Friends of the Hills. Additionally, the board of SWCB produced a craft fair at the Barn called "Home for the Holidays." Entertainment, magnificent lighting and an enormous wreath, which brightened the Barn throughout the holiday season, enlivened the event. One resident remarked, "Until we saw the Barn adorned in holiday lights, we never knew the Barn existed." (See the wonderful article that appeared on December 12th in the SF Chronicle. The online link is through the archives at www.sfgate.com).

Contact Elaine Nelson at: elainenelson21@aol.com to receive event invitations, join their activities or make a donation. **Next event is DERBY DAY on May 1st.**

3rd Annual LAH Earth Day Celebration

Location: Westwind Barn

Date: Saturday, April 24th

Time: 1 PM to 4 PM

EVENT SPONSORS: Representatives of the LAH Recreation Committee, the LAH Environmental Design Committee, and the LAH Community Relations Committee will work together with the Friends of Westwind in planning for the Earth Day Celebration.



For this 3rd Earth Day Celebration at Westwind Barn, Leopards, Etc. will again be bringing their wild cats for viewing. Two educational shows have been scheduled, and families will have an opportunity to view close up a mountain lion, lynx, cheetah, and other wild cats.

Admission is free but donations will be gladly accepted to defray costs of the event.